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## Examining Craft Work: Methodological Challenges and Choices

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Sub-theme 39: The Resurgence of Craft Work: Meanings, Methodological Challenges and Philosophies

## Examining craft work: methodological challenges and choices

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### 1. Introduction

In this paper we examine the options open to organisational researchers who seek to apply social scientific methods to study the work practices of contemporary craft practitioners<sup>1</sup>. In doing so, we respond to two linked themes from the call for papers: firstly, how do twenty-first century craftspeople enact, experience and reflect upon their practice; and secondly, what social scientific methods are likely to prove most effective in generating meaningful insights into these modes of ‘knowing *in* work’ (Rennstam and Ashcraft 2013: 3 – emphasis in original) that are simultaneously, situated, embodied, relational and reflexive?

We begin with the observation that craft-based work practices have, for many years, proven difficult to access, and to articulate, through conventional methods and modes of expression. In the traditional crafts, work practices were shrouded in mystery and sometimes acquired a mystical dimension, serving both to protect practitioners against interlopers, to maintain the quality of craft products and to preserve these practices over time (Dilley 2009, Hampâté Bâ 2010). Contemporary craft practice is more inclusive in many respects<sup>2</sup>. However, the modern workshop remains a particularly challenging empirical setting in which to conduct organisational research. Over the last half century, many commentators have pointed to the distinctiveness of the knowledge, skills and values that underpin craft work (e.g. Dormer 1994, Frayling 2011, Adamson 2013) and that give rise to a ‘workmanship of risk’ (Pye 1968). More recent literature places particular emphasis on the embodied and situated

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘craft’ encompasses a diverse range of phenomena. In this paper, we are primarily concerned with research methods that can be used to study the working practices of contemporary designer-makers and similarly experienced craftspeople based in studios and collaborative workshops.

<sup>2</sup> While many of today’s reinvented forms of craft production are more diverse and inclusive in the sense of being more open to new entrants from non-conventional backgrounds, there is also evidence that some sectors, such as craft brewing, have seen the reproduction of traditional masculinities (Land *et al.* 2018).

practices that take place in these work environments (e.g. Parolin and Matozzi 2013, Gibson, 2016, Toraldo *et al.* 2018, Bell and Vachhani, forthcoming).

The embodied and highly situated knowing that lies at the heart of these practices require the routine exercise of personal judgement based on the application of tacit knowledge (Blundel and Smith, 2013). Such forms of knowing are highly experiential, relying on sensory awareness that is enabled by the use of the hand which provides a point of physical connection between the body of the craftsperson and the materials of making. However, this presents a challenge in studying craft practices, and the tacit embodied knowledge on which they depend, which are not necessarily susceptible to linguistic explanation.

This has prompted a search for more creative, embodied methodological approaches. There is an increasing recognition that organisational researchers need to engage with craftspeople in order to gain a deeper understanding of their working lives, but this begs the question of how researchers can presume to understand the foundations of craft-based working practices and modes of learning through the application of conventional social scientific research methods (cf. Yakhlef 2010: 411).

We recognise the broader discussion about the scope and definition of craft practices and values, illustrated by contributions such as Sennett (2009), and also acknowledge interesting parallels with academic ‘craft’ (Bell and Willmott 2016). However, we have chosen to begin this methodological exploration with a more specific focus, while also allowing for a subsequent examination of the implications across a broader range of craft-related fields.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by considering two historical precursors to contemporary research on craft practice, whose work serves to illustrate the range of approaches available, and some of the practical challenges that arise when researchers seek to engage closely with craft practitioners. The core of the paper comprises a comparative review of four distinct research strategies, which we label: ‘uncovering and observing’, where researchers explore craft work through the use of archival, ethnographic and visual methods; ‘engaging and taking part’, where they participate directly in craft activities; ‘sharing the experience’, where the research is conducted by a reflective practitioner; and ‘interacting across the divide’, where practitioners and academics work together to co-produce the research. We consider a variety of empirical studies that have adopted these strategies, and assess their strengths and limitations in relation to the epistemological challenges identified previously. In the concluding discussion, we reflect on the implications for future research on contemporary craft work, and for related fields.

## 2. Two historical precursors

This section focuses on the approaches adopted by two twentieth century writers, George Sturt (1863-1927) and Dorothy Hartley (1893-1985), which gave rise to two pioneering accounts of craft work practices, *The Wheelwrights Shop* and *Made in England*<sup>3</sup>.

George Sturt's detailed and evocative account, *The Wheelwright's Shop* (Sturt [1923] 2005) has been widely recognised as a pioneering account of the working lives of traditional craftspeople. It shows how they work together, deploying a multiplicity of skills and exercising a variety of intuitive judgements in order to create a particular artefact. The former school teacher and aspiring writer was the son of a wheelwright with a 'shop' (i.e. workshop) in the Surrey countryside. Having taken over the family business on the death of his father, he spent three decades engaging with craftspeople in and around his workshop. Sturt was not a social scientist, but in this book he draws on several decades of his own practical experience, observations and personal journals to create a painstaking record of this traditional but rapidly disappearing craft<sup>4</sup>. *The Wheelwright's Shop* details each step in the fabrication process, from selecting the timber to 'hanging' the finished wheel on a cart or waggon. It also reveals the author's growing recognition that his intellect had 'fooled' him into thinking that the skilled trades that he was trying to learn were 'simple':

'Of course I had far too many irons in the fire – that was one part of the trouble. I was trying to learn four or five trades at once; and "intellect" fooled me by making them look simple. Indeed, so much of hand-work as intellect can understand does have that appearance, almost always to the undoing of the book-learned, who grow conceited.' (Sturt [1923] 2005: 84)

As the historian, E.P. Thompson has noted, Sturt's writing was transformed through his interactions with an old villager, George Grover, who gave him a deeper appreciation of local skills and traditions, and taught him to observe them more closely (Thompson 1992: x-xi). Consequently, the former teacher made exemplary use of his unique vantage point, which combined this local knowledge with his academic training and perspective. As a result, the book not only offers rich insights into a complex craft production system, but also reflects candidly on the challenges of representing embodied and situated knowledge:

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<sup>3</sup> While acknowledging that these sources are somewhat limited in their geographic scope, we selected them for the quality of their insights into the challenges of exploring craft work practices, which anticipate many of the methodological issues discussed in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Sturt took charge of the family business in 1884 and recorded his experiences in personal journals between 1890 and his death in 1927. The journals indicate that he had assembled the main themes of the book by January 1919 and completed work on it by May 1921 (Thompson 1992: viii-xii).

‘He was concerned to record in exact detail tools, their operation, and the materials operated on. This took him into dimensions of “epistemology” which the academic mind, now as then, rarely enters or even allows for. It is the formation of knowledge, not from theory, but from practice and practical transmission, from the ground up. The skilled workman is taught by his materials, and their resources and qualities enter through his hand and thence to his mind.’ (Thompson 1992: xi).

Dorothy Hartley’s ([1939] 2018) book, *Made in England*, provides an interesting contrast in terms of its scope and methods. Hartley, who had trained as an artist and designer, spent a great deal of time visiting craftspeople with the explicit aim of recording a living tradition while also recognising that many of these practices would shortly be entirely displaced by industrialisation and technological change<sup>5</sup>. Between 1932 and 1936, she toured the British Isles by car, bicycle and sometimes on foot, having been commissioned to write weekly articles on rural crafts for a national newspaper, the *Daily Sketch*, which appear to have provided the impetus for this book. She constructed extremely detailed accounts of these working practices, often accompanied by her own hand-drawn diagrams and photographs, which she took and developed. Hartley emphasises that her writing and images depict real practices that are ‘alive today’ (*ibid.* 11), and that the descriptions have been checked, and often rewritten, by the people she observes:

‘Some of the sections have been re-done half a dozen times, for the first draft would be talked over by the workmen, who would make small changes, and then I would write it out again; next, somebody else would be dubious about some point, and want to add some detail. The work people took all the corrections very seriously and went to endless trouble to see that everything was “properly put down”.’ (*ibid.* 13)

Hartley organised her study into chapters, based on the raw materials (e.g. ‘Wood’, ‘Straw, reed, grass and willow’, ‘Stone’, ‘Bricks and pottery’, ‘Wool and feathers’). Her writing is for the most part straightforward, yet also subtle and inquisitive: it may focus on the minutiae of a particular process at one point, then ‘zoom out’ to connect with its historical or geographic context. For example, this extract describing the work of a thatcher is accompanied by several photographs and detailed illustrations:

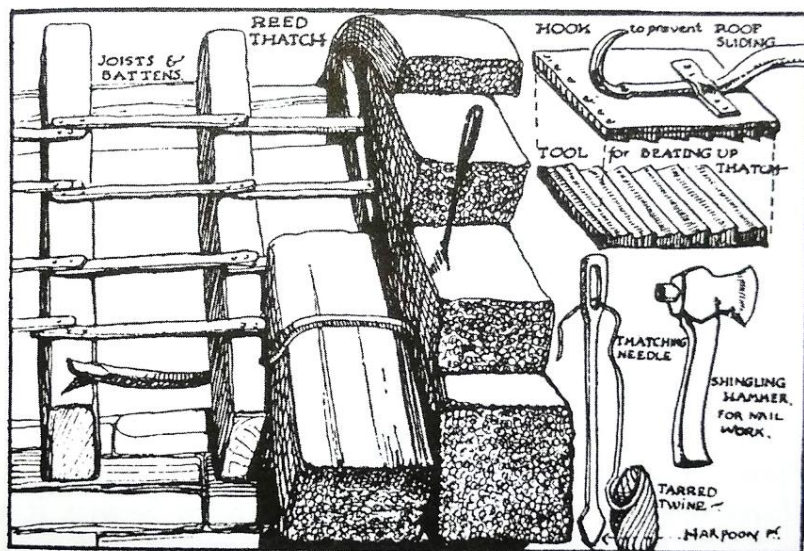
‘Under the top layer in the centre [of the roof] were stowed the thatcher’s tools. Every thatcher has his own tools, usually made by the local smith to his own requirements, and this

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<sup>5</sup> In 1931, she published a book on medieval costume, and in the same year travelled by car from Egypt to the Congo. She later became more well-known for another historical study, *Food in England* (1954).

one had a short-handled long-tooth rake, a Kentish axe, and a beat made (unusually) entirely of iron, with a long hollow socket for the wooden handle. The beaters are more usually of wood, across the ace of which grooves are cut at an angle to catch the ends of the reed and drive them back and upwards to a smooth finish.’ (*ibid.* 75)

**Figure 1: Sample illustration drawn by Dorothy Hartley**



Source: Hartley ([1939] 2018: 75)

She shares George Sturt’s intense respect for the craftspeople she is writing about, disparages what she sees as industrial society’s lack of appreciation of these country workers who, in contrast to their urban counterparts, are obliged to think for themselves:

‘Therefore do not belittle my earnest descriptions of small workshops and little jobs, for perhaps if you study a job in its fundamental simplicity, you will more easily understand its growth and see what the individual worker has lost or gained by its commercial development.’ (*ibid.* 13)

A century on, a growing band of researchers face similar epistemological challenges as they embark on new studies of 21<sup>st</sup> century craft work and organisation. In this context, the writings of Sturt and Hartley provide us with a helpful benchmark against which to evaluate alternative methodologies.

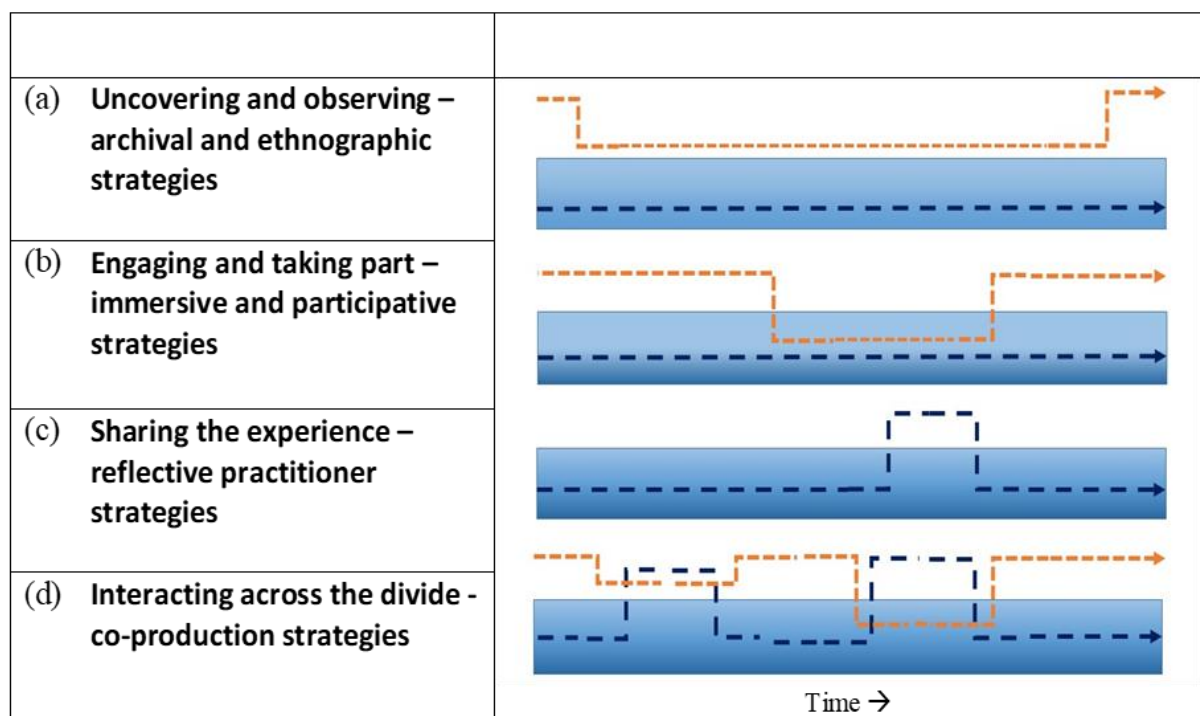
### **3. Four potential research strategies**

In this section we consider four strategies that have been adopted, to varying degrees, to gain a better understanding of particular forms of craft knowledge and work practice. We have represented them schematically, drawing loosely on the analogy of two elements: air (academic discourse) and water (craft practice), and their ‘natural’ inhabitants, birds

(academic researchers) and marine creatures (craft practitioners). The vertical lines indicate the ways in which the inhabitants of each element seek to move towards one another.

These strategies are often combined in empirical studies – including Sturt’s work – to produce a more rounded picture<sup>6</sup>, but we have represented each visually in order to clarify key differences and explore their explanatory potential (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Four potential strategies – a schematic representation**



***Note:** the dotted lines represent the roles of the researchers (orange) and practitioners (blue); the blue shaded area represents the craft practitioners’ domain and the white area the domain of academic discourse. The vertical and horizontal positioning of the lines is indicative of potential degrees of proximity and engagement with each domain.*

In the first two strategies, the social scientist is the primary actor. She decides to engage with research subject or participant, with the aim of making social phenomena that would otherwise remain obscure and unrecognised available to a wider readership.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Butler and Cunliffe (2018) attempt to reconstruct the interactions between hand and machine in a now disused factory through a combination of site visits, archival searches, video recording, observation, interviews with former employees, and trying out the activity.

### *(a) Uncovering and observing – archival and ethnographic strategies*

There is an extensive body of historical and ethnographic research on craft work practices and artefacts from different cultural traditions and time periods. Historical studies play an essential role in reconstructing evidence on practices that have been ‘lost’ or superseded, and in tracing the antecedents of contemporary ways of working (Blundel 2018). This typically requires careful attention to archival evidence and, in some cases, to surviving artefacts, such as tools (e.g. Moeran 1997, Butler and Cunliffe 2018). Hartley’s ([1939] 2018) account exemplifies the value of sensitive and detailed observation, which – like Sturt’s – bears witness to long-vanished craft practices and behaviours, while Dilley’s (2009) anthropological study depicts the successive stages of learning in a traditional Senegalese weaving apprenticeship, which progress move beyond mere instruction towards the, ‘dreaming and other forms of spirit contact’ (*ibid.* 58).

Visual methods have been used to uncover and observe traditional crafts, including detailed examinations of knife and spoon making (Wood 2014, Wood *et al.* 2009). For example, Almevik *et al.* (2013) conduct a detailed examination of a 1971 documentary ‘*Liesmide*’ (wrought scythe), which sought to record two experienced blacksmiths making a wrought iron scythe; by reconstructing the task, the researchers identified a number discontinuities and in its depiction of the process, as well as substantive technical errors on the part of the blacksmiths, which meant that the end products would not have been useable<sup>7</sup>. The authors concluded that the producers and editors of the film did not fully understand the crafts that they were seeking to record and that augmented forms of documentation are needed in this area (*ibid.* 157). Wood (2014: 68) draws a similar conclusion, stating that:

‘There is an increasing use of video in practice-led research because equipment and consumables have become easily affordable. However, care needs to be taken if the resultant footage is to show authentic activity rather than a performance for the camera.’

As this quote highlights, however, the epistemological stance that informs the above critique of the use of visual methods to study of craft assumes a realist ontology. It therefore seeks to capture an ‘authentic activity’ through photographic representation based on the assumption that images capture something that is objectively observable and real. Using visual methods such as photography as a transparent conveyor of authentic craft practice betrays an

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<sup>7</sup> It is not clear why the two blacksmiths failed to create functional scythes, but the authors refer to them as elderly and suggest that the problem reflects, ‘a break in tradition of craftsmanship’ (*ibid.* 157), coupled with a lack of understanding on the part of the film-makers.



epistemological naivety through an ontological privileging of visual data. Bell and Davison (2013) argue that there is a need for researchers to move beyond such realist assumptions in visual studies of organization. In order to develop alternatives to such empirical / empiricist use of visual methods, there is a need for more deliberately theoretically-informed approaches, such as semiotic analysis, to draw attention to the intentionally constructed nature of images, their framing and symbolic value. This can be used to deliberately focus on the ‘performance’ of craft work and to explore how signs are used to construct the meaning of craft<sup>8</sup>.

***(b) Engaging and taking part – immersive and participative strategies***

Ethnographic researchers sometimes progress from participant observation to ‘observant participation’ (Moeran 2009), a more immersive approach that has obvious risks, but which can provide the researcher with access to what Goffman has previously termed ‘back stage’ behaviour (*ibid.*: 148). At first sight, the embodied nature of craft practice would appear to lend itself to this ‘enactive’ ethnography (Wacquant 2015). However, in most situations a researcher’s capacity to ‘learn the trade’ is likely to be severely limited. This potential weakness in the approach was anticipated by George Sturt, who offered the following candid reflections on his own physical and cognitive limitations:

‘With the idea that I was going to learn everything from the beginning I put myself eagerly to boys’ jobs, not at all dreaming that, at over twenty, the nerves and muscles are no longer able to put on the cell-growths, and so acquire the habits of perceiving and doing, which should have begun at fifteen. Could not intellect achieve it? In fact, intellect made but a fumbling imitation of real knowledge, yet hardly deigned to recognise how clumsy in fact it was (Sturt [1923] 2005: 83)<sup>9</sup>.

Richard Ocejó’s (2017) study incorporates a variant of the immersive approach, along with other methods, such as photo elicitation, to examine new urban craft work, mainly through interactions with male bartenders, distillers, barbers and butchers. The findings, along with the author’s own reflections in a methodological appendix (*ibid.*: 267-284), raise interesting questions about the extent to which researchers and practitioners can experience similar

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<sup>8</sup> These reflexive arguments are becoming increasingly important across the field of organisational studies as technological innovations open up new opportunities for researchers to represent issues related to work, occupations and institutions through the medium of video-based ethnography (Hassard *et al.* 2018).

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that Sturt is also very aware of his perceived lack of commercial experience and takes to performing the role. When dealing with travelling merchants, he describes himself as, ‘aping the man of the world, in the hope that they might not notice anything odd about me.’ (*ibid.* 85)

bodily and emotional sensations. In an earlier book of readings, Ocejó indicates how the approach might open up new insights:

‘Doing what their participants do provides fieldworkers with the opportunity to experience and perform the behaviours that are central to the meaning-making processes with which people regularly engage and interpret.’ (Ocejó 2012: 80).

This form of embodied immersion, where the researcher treats their own sensory experiences as a source of data, and then uses this to generate insight into the meaning that craft workers attach to the work they do (see Wacquant, 2015), offers a potentially productive way of generating insight into making practices. However, there is a need for reflexivity in applying this research strategy. In the case of his own study of new urban crafts, the author acknowledges that he had a similar profile to most of his subjects and that, ‘such understandings can be more difficult to achieve in studies when the researchers are very different from the people they study’ (Ocejó 2017: 271). Ocejó also states that he never considered attempting to become a barber, recognising that a long and costly training, followed by years of cutting would be needed, ‘to truly feel comfortable as a barber’ (*ibid.*: 275). This critical perspective should also extend to role played by the researcher’s body. Rather than treating it – in Ocejó’s case that of a, ‘a young (mid-thirties), white, straight, middle-class, and well-educated man’ (*ibid.*: 277) – as an unproblematic resource that enables ethnographic proximity or ‘insider status’; there is also a need for greater reflexivity concerning the *effects* of different bodies on fieldwork encounters in studying craft work. Specifically, the personal embeddedness and situatedness of male researchers’ bodies in masculine work settings needs to be acknowledged and problematised, rather than being positioned as the basis of (more) authentic fieldwork encounters (Bell 1999).

### ***(c) Sharing the experience – reflective practitioner strategies***

Here, in contrast to the previous strategies, the practitioner takes on the role of researcher. There are many notable examples of craftspeople reflecting deeply on their own practice, including the designer Le Corbusier’s published notebooks, fellow designer Charlotte Perriand’s autobiography, *A Life of Creation*, English potter, Alan Caiger-Smith’s study, *Pottery, People and Time*, and Robin Wood’s, *The Wooden Bowl*<sup>10</sup>. Engaging in this kind of detailed reflection places additional cognitive demands on the craft practitioner, beyond that found in more traditional forms of craft work:

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<sup>10</sup> See also: Harrod (2015: 147), who discusses several similar works by reflective practitioners. Robin Wood makes finely-worked bowls and other products using traditional techniques: [www.robin-wood.co.uk](http://www.robin-wood.co.uk). His book is primarily a detailed historical account, but the writing is informed by the author’s own practical experience.

‘If making is knowing, it does not follow that all makers “know” their craft. They might know how to produce an effective, economical, or detailed result. But this does not mean that they can change completely, reverse, or deconstruct their *techne* in such a way as to challenge established thinking about this craft.’ (Lehmann 2012: 151)

By taking on this challenge, reflective practitioners can become a source of unique insights into craft working practices, products and environments. Potential limitations, from a social science perspective, may include a tendency to take the perspective of an individual maker, which may marginalise the voices of other craftspeople (Thompson 1997)<sup>11</sup>, and – in some cases – limited engagement with the broader academic research literature<sup>12</sup>. However, these issues are increasingly being addressed by a body of practitioners who are embarking on doctoral studies, often as part of a hybrid career that combines craft practice with teaching activities in colleges and universities. These contemporary craft practitioners can typically exercise a much greater degree of reflexivity, in comparison to their precursors. This is stimulated by multiple factors, including their formal education, more open and collaborative work environments, larger and more diverse social networks, all of which have provided access to far much richer sources of information and inspiration. In combination, these factors are contributing to a greater capacity for innovation and the reinvention of craft practice (Blundel and Smith 2013).

In this section, we explore the potential of this approach by drawing directly on the reflections of our co-author, Philip, a furniture designer-maker who completed a PhD that build on three decades of practice as a furniture designer-maker<sup>13</sup>.

### ***Reflective practice: turning making into writing***

The last forty years or so have seen a great resurgence in the crafts and with it, a good deal in the way of reflection on the problematic nature of research in this field - much of which has been driven by its key institution the UK’s Crafts Council. This has led to a special literature of its own which has attempted to illuminate this relationship and negotiate the complexities of translating aesthetic and exigent impulses into a transparent text; that is, to *turn making into writing* or what is now more formally referred to as *reflective practice*. The Crafts Council’s conference, ‘Making It’ (1995), was the final conference in a five-

<sup>11</sup> For example, Souto (2018: 218) cites the case of Le Corbusier’s working partnership with Charlotte Perriand (1903–1999), commenting that, ‘In addition to the gender bias and its blindness to the contribution of individual women, there is also a refusal to recognise the importance of collaboration in the design process.

<sup>12</sup> Exceptions include Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa’s, *The Thinking Hand* (Pallasmaa 2009, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> We are combining these reflections with those of several other craft practitioners who have undertaken doctoral research related to their making practices.

year cycle intended to ‘take stock’ of the vexed relationship between research and the crafts. It agreed (amongst others) three ‘common principles in relation to crafts research’ – namely that such research:

- Should be seen as a wide-ranging matrix concerned with the interrelationship between the object, its place, the process, the individual and external forces.
- Target audiences were identified as students/learners, peers, the public, other makers, clients, consumers, funders, worthy bodies and other researchers.
- Forms of dissemination for research included exhibitions, catalogues, articles, refereed journals, conferences, papers and permanent crafts collections.

The research seminar held by the UK’s Crafts Council in 1998 also led to an interesting series of papers published under the title, *Ideas in the Making: Practice in Theory*. In her introduction, the editor Pamela Johnson affirmed an observation regarding the historic reluctance of the craftsperson ‘to talk about practice’, noting that, ‘historically craft knowledge was not written down, but guarded and protected in guilds and handed on through the apprentice system.’ However, Johnson goes on to make an important point with regard to the contemporary dimension of the crafts, arguing:

‘[I]t is important that the field of contemporary craft practice becomes more widely understood. The crafts are a diverse and sometimes contradictory set of practices, fundamentally about materials, processes and their related traditions, but it is possible to adopt different positions in relation to them. In asserting a contemporary role for crafts, it is important to articulate that the field is not simply about preserving things because we valued them in the past. We need to argue vigorously the importance of exploring craft materials, processes and traditions for their contemporary significance (Johnson 1998: 10-11).

She subsequently takes up these issues in a paper entitled *Can Theory Damage Your Practice?* in which she notes:

‘If we consider how any object, including the craft object, comes into being, we will not find a single cause. Instead, there will be an interplay of determinants which might include individual expressive need, cultural politics, institutional boundaries, technological developments, funding opportunities and media attention. In order to fully engage in discussion of, or write about, objects and practices we need to draw on a number of critical perspectives’ (*ibid.*: 17).

### ***The Writing Problem***

My PhD was a response on the part of one maker to develop and articulate his practice in such a way as to give it currency or what Johnson terms, ‘contemporary significance’ (*ibid.*: 11). However, there are many problems inherent in seeking to articulate craft practices, not least of which is what might be called, ‘the writing problem’, a problem which has been the subject of some scrutiny. In a thought-provoking article, Davey has observed for example:

‘[T]he process of writing can serve as an ontological enablement ... [which] draws, tightens and slackens the line between the material and the intellectual. It prizes open the enigma of the silent materiality of the art object and allows it to breathe by connecting it to the ideational horizons beyond the context of its own production ... it is an activity which opens up a reflective space between a works sensuous immediacy and its concept.’ (*ibid.*: X).

Davey goes on to suggest that the ‘reflective space’ occupied by text offers less in the way of an *adjunct* to the creative process but more in the way of an *enablement* to ‘the realisation of the art object’. In short then, what Davey is arguing – and by extension what my thesis argued – is that while writing cannot be regarded as a substitute for making, it can open up the making process in such a way as to allow greater access to the complex continuum of capabilities and considerations which inform that process. As Davey argues, ‘writing does not and cannot translate verbatim the complexity of lived experience and therefore should not be criticised for what it cannot do.’ (*ibid.*: X)

Therefore, in terms of the relationship of the textual element of my PhD to the making process, it must be considered contingent – by its very nature instructive but incomplete. What the text is intended to provide should be seen (primarily) as an attempt to document and contextualise the research journey in such a way as to offer insights and evidence with regard to a, ‘systematic investigation within a specific context in order to solve an identified problem in that context’. Such a text is clearly also intended to offer the possibility of contributing to scholarship in the field through what the Brown *et al.* (2004: 5) refer to as ‘systematic dissemination of the results.’ It is of course, in terms of this latter connection that my thesis ultimately rests its claim on originality – in opening up and systematically articulating the research process – not on the strategies developed in the course of the research nor the body of work (the ‘Signed & Sealed’ brand), developed by way of design outcomes. All of the above have defined the trajectory of my research and

with it the orbit of my thesis, which has (throughout) aspired to realise the aims of applied research in the creative arts as defined by the relevant research body:

‘[Applied research] aims to create new or improved systems (of thought or production), artefacts, products, processes, materials, devices, or services for long-term economic, social and/or cultural benefit. It is informed by the intellectual infrastructure of *Scholarly Research* in the field; it applies and/or transfers enhanced knowledge, methods, tools and resources from *Pure* and *Developmental* research; it also contributes to scholarship in the field through *systematic* dissemination of the results.’ (*ibid.*: 5)

#### ***(d) Interacting across the divide - co-production strategies***

The fourth strategy differs from the others in that the researcher and practitioner are engaged in an extended collaboration over time. It has some echoes of Sturt’s relationship with Grover, which taught him to observe more closely and to write in a new way (Thompson 1992: x). In our case, the practitioner is no longer simply a research subject, but has become actively involved in data collection, analysis and theorising. This approach has been termed, ‘para-ethnography’ to indicate the de-centring of the researcher’s role:

‘Based on a constructivist epistemology, para-ethnography stresses co-construction, where fields and their representations are co-created by scholars and practitioners.’ (Islam 2015: 240).

It may therefore be distinguished from the reflective practitioner strategy, or from ‘purer’ autoethnographic accounts, on the basis that the practitioner is actively engaged in an organised reflexive dialogue with another researcher (Cunliffe 2001). This para-ethnographic approach was been deployed recently in two insightful empirical examinations of organisational leadership and learning (Down and Hughes 2009, Kempster and Stewart 2010). In the latter case, the authors conclude that an organised reflexive dialogue, ‘helped a manager understand the taken-for-granted and underlying power issues that shape relational meaning and practice (*ibid.*: 217).

When we (Philip and Richard) sought to adopt a broadly similar approach in our own recent work, we were surprised at the apparent absence of prior examples in the craft literature. Following Down and Hughes (2009), we have connected significant episodes in the life stories of designer-makers, with an element of auto-ethnographic reflexivity (*ibid.*: 85-86). Our collaboration brings together the experiences of a craft practitioner who has worked for

more than 40 years as a furniture designer-maker (Philip) (Figure 3), and an organizational researcher and educator (Richard), who has examined growth and innovation processes in a variety of craft-based enterprises over the last 20 years, including artisanal cheese makers, small boat builders and musical instrument makers. The gap between our worlds was reduced somewhat by Phil's doctoral research experience, during which he investigated aspects of his own working practice (Koomen 2006). In addition, we found it helpful to discuss the parallels between the crafts of designing and making furniture and that of academic research and scholarship – particularly in relation to Richard's authorship of textbooks, articles and blended learning courses<sup>14</sup>. We used site visits and extended semi-structured interviews to span two generations of craftspeople in two contrasting fields – furniture-making and ceramics. Richard interviewed Phil in his workshop and later visited one of his former apprentices who had gone on to establish his own business. Phil interviewed the potter, Alan Caiger-Smith, founder of the Aldermaston Pottery, and also visited one of Alan's former apprentices in her studio. Both researchers were involved in the transcription and thematic analysis. We have had a series of meetings and exchanges of draft material over the last three years, and our ideas have been further refined by presenting our provisional findings to several mixed audiences of academics and practitioners<sup>15</sup>. We also have broadened the scope of our study by engaging with other designer-makers and by drawing on ethnographic and biographical sources (Koomen and Blundel 2019).<sup>16</sup>

In our own experience, the conversational, or dialogic aspect of our collaboration has generated new, co-created insights and ways of understanding – and we would argue that this may be a unique attribute of the para-ethnographic approach. We have found it to be a particularly effective way to explore technical, embodied and *values-based* dimensions of craft practice, which might otherwise prove elusive. For example, in a recent project we (Philip and Richard) were able to draw on these emergent insights when constructing our semi-structured questionnaires and interpreting evidence collected from interviews with other craftspeople<sup>17</sup>. Philip adopted dual roles as conventional research 'subject' and equal partner in the tasks of evidence-collection, analysis and authorship, while Richard's distance from the

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<sup>14</sup> We find significant commonalities and connections between different domains of craft practice, which can be obscured by more tangible, surface-level differences. These are exemplified by the productive exchanges that frequently occur between artists and craftspeople from different fields.

<sup>15</sup> This included a co-presented seminar at the *Making Futures* conference, Plymouth School of Art, November 2017, and a craft research symposium in Windermere, May 2018.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Alan Caiger-Smith's finely-worked autobiographical account, *Pottery, People and Time* (Caiger-Smith 1995).

<sup>17</sup> We found that interviews conducted by a fellow craft practitioner benefitted from extensive probing by the interviewer that a non-practitioner is unqualified to do. The subsequent analysis of the interviews is further enhanced by the exchange of academic and experiential perspectives.

immediate domain of practice proved useful in challenging assumptions and making links with other craft fields<sup>18</sup>. We have not combined the researcher role with direct immersion in Philip's craft practice (i.e. designing and making furniture) and remain sceptical as to whether a non-specialist's necessarily superficial and transient engagement is capable of generating useful insights, beyond those already available using alternative methods. However, we have often referred to our experience of related crafts (e.g. wood engraving and printmaking) in conversations, so there may be potential to explore this area further. As we prepared this co-authored paper, Philip reflected back on this three-year collaboration in the following terms:

'The para-ethnographic approach established a peer relationship between Richard and me that engendered trust and encouraged a mutuality of insights and understanding. Our collaboration has been very effective in revealing a form of craft practice that to my knowledge has not previously been articulated in either academic research or craft literature. As a craft practitioner I was able to open a portal through which Richard and I could explore experiential craft knowledge. Richard's theoretical knowledge and research skills enabled a dialogue between us that produced a depth of shared understanding. I think we both felt our collaboration overcame the limitations of reflective practice and ethnographic approach; two methodologies we are familiar with.'

**Figure 3: 'Pondlife' bench by Philip Koomen**



© Philip Koomen ([www.philipkoomen.co.uk](http://www.philipkoomen.co.uk))

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<sup>18</sup> We also concluded that it was important for collaborators to establish the roles and responsibilities for each party (e.g. recognising that practitioners may be contributing *pro-bono* and how the researcher's academic writing skills will be used to articulate the findings).



## **Concluding discussion**

We opened with the observation that the embodied knowing and experience of craft practitioners has not proven to be readily accessible to their counterparts in the world of organisational research. Researchers in this area have also found it difficult to articulate their findings within the constraints imposed by established modes of academic writing.

The paper set out four distinct methodological strategies, based on a loose analogy in which craft practitioners were represented as marine creatures, while academic researchers were birds, each being the natural inhabitants of their separate elements: air (academic discourse) and water (craft practice). The first strategy, ‘uncovering and observing’, using methods such as archival research and various types of ethnography, can enable the researcher to observe at close quarters, but as we indicated in the case of visual research, a theoretically-informed approach is required to guard against potential pitfalls in interpreting empirical sources such as photographs and video. The second strategy, ‘engaging and taking part’ encompasses varying degrees of immersion, where the researcher seeks to experience, and in some respects to embody, specific craft practices. We acknowledged the potential of such methods but, again, cautioned against an insufficient reflexivity on the part of the researcher. The third strategy, ‘sharing the experience’ is distinctive in that the practitioner takes on the role of researcher, and as a consequence is required both to develop a rather more reflexive relationship to their craft and its working practices, and also develop ways of framing and articulating these ideas. We took the example of practitioners undertaking doctoral research to focus attention on the core challenge of ‘turning making into writing’ or translating from the realms of the material and embodied, into that of academic discourse. Lastly, we examined the strategy of, ‘interacting across the divide’, in which practitioners and researchers engage in an organised, reflexive dialogue. In some respects, this strategy appears to be an extension of that of the reflective practitioner, but with a ‘para-ethnographic’ dimension that provides additional criticality to the process of enquiry, which should also be reflected in subsequent co-produced outputs.

Each of the four strategies outlined in this paper has a part to play in enriching our understanding of these phenomena. Of these, the strategy of co-production is by far the least commonly applied. We find this surprising, and suggest that a para-ethnographic approach has considerable potential as a way of generating shared understandings, while also overcoming some of the limitations of the other strategies:

‘What it clearly does is avoid the moral and emotional neutrality that social science so confidently claims, so often. It doesn’t do this by polemic. Rather, in however small a way, it

establishes a community of interest between the researcher and researched: a mutuality of accounts.’ (Down and Hughes 2009: 96)

It is clearly important to engage with craft practitioners in order to gain a deeper understanding of the foundations of their engaged practice (Ferris 2016: n.p.), but some degree of engagement is common to all the methods discussed in this paper, para-ethnographic, co-produced research takes the degree of engagement in to another level.

There has been a recent upsurge in interest in many different aspects of the contemporary craft ‘revival’, prompting debate about how organisational studies researchers can contribute to our understanding of a diverse, contested and often elusive phenomenon (Bell *et al.* 2018: 1-19). This trend has been complemented, over the last four decades, by a growing number of reflective craft practitioners with much to share, who would welcome this form of collaboration<sup>19</sup>. The new generation of craft researchers has much to learn from the experiences of pioneering writers, such as George Sturt and Dorothy Hartley, as well as from more recent craft scholars who have drawn upon one or more of the broad research strategies outlined in this paper. We hope that it will encourage others to engage in their own explorations of contemporary craft, and in doing so, to give due consideration to the most appropriate strategies for their particular purposes.

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